

[Jonathan Sanford Ater]

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Range-lore

Ruby Mosley

San Angelo, Texas.

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RANGE-LORE

Jonathan Sanford Ater was born in Burnett County in 1854. His father, George Ater, came to Texas in 1852.

"My father owned and operated the first woolen mill in Texas," says Mr. Jonathan Sanford "Toad" Ater. "He did not go to the battle field to fight in the war, he had some kind of fever that left one leg shorter than the other but this physical handicap didn't keep father from doing his bit at home. C12 - 2/11/41 - Texas 2 His duty was to care for the widows left behind. He issued cotton to them to make clothes for their families.

"The homes with so many inconveniences made the household duties quite a problem. Coffee was made from parched corn, okra, diced sweet potatoes, wheat or rye. Each member had a job to do before a meal was complete. The women made the cloth, then made clothes out of it for the entire family, by hand; so you see why there were no idle people at all in those days.

"I starter ranching when I was 21 years old. Me and my brother had about six hundred head of cattle on Pecan Bayou in Callahan County. We kept them about four years and sold out to begin working on the trail.

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"I went back to Williamson County and worked for the Snyder Brothers outfit. On my first trail drive we went from Williamson County to up in Wyoming, about 246 miles the other side of Cheyenne on Cheyenne River. Old George Arnett was boss of the gang until we got to the Platte River then George quit and I took charge. We had an old negro, Willis Russell, to drive the chuck wagon and do the cooking.

"We had about 6,000 in the herd and sold them to ranchmen. It took from May 'til October to make the trip. We didn't have any unusual trouble on this 3 drive, not even a stampede. When the Indians came around we gave them a beef and they went their way.

"The next time I went up the trail George Arnett and I carried horses. The only trouble we had was when the horses strayed from the camp. They sometimes went about twenty miles away before we could locate them. When we got to Cheyenne, George took about half of the horses and went to South Dakota and I stayed at Cheyenne five weeks before I sold mine.

"The only wild Indians I ever saw was one day when I was rounding horses in Williamson County the Indians appeared as I was leaving with them. I knew they were after the horses and rode a little fast. They didn't catch me as I was in the lead.

"Old Andrew Mather was the Indian man of our country. He killed an Indian and skinned him and made bridle reins out of the skin just for a novelty.

"One time Andrew was on scout duty and saw an immense bear; of course it was against the rules for him to shoot animals while on duty. He took his rope, gave it a swing and got his bear. Andrew's horse tightened the rope while he took his knife and killed him. He was one of the best, with his rope. One time he was over in what is now Runnels County, when he roped a buffalo, saddled and rode him as if he was a horse. When he was tired he got off, then killed and 4 skinned the buffalo.

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"I rode horses when I was young and never saw one that I couldn't ride; I'm not bragging but I never was thrown. In my riding days we rode until the horse stopped pitchin', now the modern rider rides three or four jumps, then another fellow rides up and takes him away and then he is called a bronc buster. I don't care about seeing any such ridin'. I never watch them ride here in the Fat Stock Show.

"Of all the ranchmen, cowboys, and bronc riders, I am proud of my old pal that I once lived near and rode the range with and he is J. Frank Norfleet. When he starts anything he completes his job.

"Well, I'll tell you a little of what he did; J. Frank chased five confidence men 30,000 miles transcontinental and got 'em. These swindlers got him for a large sum of money and every one else that they could. The laws were too weak for them. When these outlaws would go up to an officer and pay him for protection it was pretty hard for an honest man to get along.

"Old Frank took things in his own hands. He always said, 'Treat the other fellow right; then make him treat you right,' and off he went after 'em.

"Frank got into some mighty tough spots when he hit the sections where the officers had been paid off; it was in that area that the swindlers hid out. He got into 5 some terrible traps and most of the time had to man-handle or be quicker on the draw than the outlaws. But he never fired a shot on his rounds. He found notes where they had planned to kill him then another time while he was their captive, was given a glass with a poison drink but didn't drink it.

"The following outlaws had swindled people from coast to coast: Old Joe Furey, the gang leader, L. J. Ward, W. B. Spencer, Reno Hamlin and Charles Gerber doing their part, and they were captured by Norfleet.

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“What J. Frank Norfleet has done for this country cannot be estimated. He is a descendant of Robert E. Lee and to my knowledge I think his works were as great.” Range-lore

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San Angelo, Texas.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Jonathan Sanford 'Toad' Ater, San Angelo, Texas, interviewed January 24, 1938.